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2019-06-05

Elomäki , A , Kantola , J , Koivunen , A & Ylöstalo , H 2019 , ' Affective Virtuosity : Challenges for Governance Feminism in the Context of the Economic Crisis ' , Gender, Work and Organization , vol. 26 , no. 6 , pp. 822-839 . <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12313>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/306735>
<https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12313>

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Affective virtuosity: Challenges for governance feminism in the context of the economic crisis

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This article explores the possibilities and constraints for feminist knowledge production and diffusion, and its influence over policy making and public debate in the context of austerity and neoliberal governance. By analysing the process in which a group of Finnish academic feminists used their expert position to influence government policy in 2015–2017, the article illustrates the strategies they adopted to engage in political debates and how they negotiated the new political landscape. The research material was derived from two years of action research and participant observation and is considered through the theoretical lens of governance feminism. The article makes a distinctive contribution to extant theories of governance feminism, by drawing upon theories of affects and ambivalence as a complement to governance feminism's focus on discourses and co-optation. We coin the term *affective virtuosity* to highlight the importance of affect in feminist knowledge production and diffusion, and in shaping the various perspectives available to feminist scholars in encounters with politicians and policymakers.

KEYWORDS

affects, austerity politics, economic crisis, feminist knowledge production, governance feminism, neoliberalism

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1 | INTRODUCTION

A male minister, encountered in our research, argued that *economy* and *equality* were like fire and water in a crisis: the two are thus presented as incompatible, with the economy self-evidently assuming priority in policy deliberations. Feminist knowledge about the economic crisis has indeed had frustratingly little impact on public debates and political decision-making. The primacy given to economics and neoliberal policy solutions at times of crisis makes feminist knowledge more contested than ever (Prügl, 2016). Using the case of Finland, this article explores the feminist production of knowledge about the economic crisis and austerity politics, and the processes of feminist knowledge diffusion: the conditions under which feminist knowledge can have an effect on policy making or fail when trying to do so. On the one hand, we illustrate the difficulties that academic feminist actors face when they engage in political debates about the economy, especially in the context of neoliberalism and the dominance of austerity politics. On the other, we analyse the specific strategies adopted by academic feminist actors who were willing and able to negotiate the terrain of such a political context.

The distinct theoretical contribution in this article is to broaden the debates about governance feminism by underlining the analytical insights offered by affect theory. The scholarship that has employed theories of governance feminism has revealed some of the challenges to feminist knowledge production and diffusion in the context of neoliberal governance. For example, many studies have highlighted the familiar risks of cooptation. We suggest that there is an identifiable pressure to read feminist engagements in such pessimistic ways within the governance feminism framework. We qualify these tendencies with the help of affect theory and bring out the ambivalences in feminist knowledge production and diffusion. Our further contribution is to coin the term *affective virtuosity*. Governance feminism frameworks have been effective in showing the impact of hegemonic discourses such as neoliberalism, and in suggesting that feminists need to acquire 'discursive virtuosity', so they acquire a command of, and speak, the right language to be heard (Brunila, 2009, 2013). The notion of affective virtuosity employed here, highlights 'the vital role of emotion in the construction of knowledge' (Jaggar, 1989, p. 151) and shows how affects shape the roles available for feminist scholars in policy making and political environments.

The specific empirical case study involves Finland. Finland has a relatively weak feminist movement that has relied on institutionalized cross-party collaboration between women's organizations. Like other Nordic countries in varying degrees, feminist knowledge producers in Finland (women's organizations, feminists in political parties, feminist state actors and feminist academics) have traditionally aligned themselves closely with a presumably benign welfare state. Feminists have operated in the state, in its working groups and meetings, and this closeness has been framed as a key resource of gender equality policies. Recently, however, this tradition has been challenged. In contrast to the other Nordic countries, Finland recovered slowly from the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent Euro Crisis. Instead, the Finnish economy fell into a new recession, and by 2015, Finland had elected a right-conservative-populist government to implement stringent austerity policies in order to remedy the situation. The political and economic landscape that was cultivated in the wake of the crisis is thus the context of this article. We argue that in this specific environment, the traditional processes of state feminist knowledge production failed to insert the gender aspect into the new political agenda of the government, and thus created a political vacuum for new types of feminist actions, from which a more prominent role for feminist academics emerged.

The so-called Sipilä government (named after Prime Minister Juha Sipilä), comprising the conservative Centre Party, the right-wing National Coalition Party and the populist right Finns Party, published its government programme in May 2015. In addition to its highly gendered austerity agenda, it was the first government programme in 20 years to exclude measures that promoted gender equality. Instead, it included the infamous sentence 'Women and men are equal in Finland.' The government programme, which made visible the inability of the state feminist knowledge processes to influence policy making, triggered the feminist actions that are studied in detail in this article. At the centre of these actions was a demand that the government undertake a gender impact assessment of the government programme drafted by a group of academic feminists. This demand — along with a preliminary gender

impact assessment drawing on academic research and illustrating the programme's highly differential impact on women and men – took the form of an open letter to the government.

Unfolding throughout 2015–2017, the process initiated by this feminist action, provided a rich source of material to analyse the conditions of feminist knowledge production in the context of austerity politics and neoliberal governance. The key research questions were as follows: How are the conditions of feminist knowledge production and diffusion negotiated in the context of neoliberal austerity politics? What roles and positions are available for feminist knowledge producers in their encounters with politicians and policymakers, and what kinds of affects are mobilized and negotiated in these encounters? Of particular interest was what our case revealed about shifts in expertise and advocacy, as well as what kinds of expertise and knowledge are perceived as relevant and important in the context of policy making.

In the analysis sections of this article, a narrative of feminist knowledge production and diffusion are traced in five acts. Firstly, the open letter is traced as a form of *political protest* shaped by the feminist affects of anger and frustration but kept strictly under control in order to make the feminist knowledge of the open letter effective. This neutral position of academic experts, it is argued, depoliticized the content of the letter. Secondly, when publicized by the *media* the academic knowledge of the open letter was de-neutralized and reframed as an issue of disadvantaging women, calling for political mobilization and forcing politicians to react. Thirdly, meetings with offended *politicians* who treated academic experts as political opponents, offered feminist knowledge production the role as a deferred evaluator of government policy sometime in the future, not now. In the fourth act, frustrated feminist scholars participated in strictly controlled ministerial *workshops* and were disappointed by the government's action plan for gender equality. Finally, two *projects* emerged to consolidate and build on the new feminist ways to produce knowledge and engage with the media and politicians. In contrast to the obstacles encountered by traditional gender equality actors in the field, the academic-led projects gained new levels of access and influence in debates about economics, but also precipitated the dilemma of cooptation.

The findings presented here illustrate that even when feminist knowledge – in particular when provided by feminist academic experts – is welcomed in politics and policy making, its position remains marginal. In schemes of evidence-based politics, feminist knowledge becomes a footnote or a variable in impact assessments, and in methodological hierarchies, theoretical approaches and qualitative studies weigh lightly in comparison with randomized controlled trials. When cast in the role of evaluator, critic or educator, a feminist knowledge producer has little agenda-setting power. At the same time, co-optation of feminist knowledge also includes possibilities for positive change. The negotiation with neoliberal governance results in affective clashes and ambivalences that condition knowledge production and diffusion at all stages, requiring what we term here as affective virtuosity.

2 | FEMINIST KNOWLEDGE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ECONOMIC CRISIS AND NEOLIBERAL GOVERNANCE IN FINLAND

The effect of the global financial crisis manifested itself markedly more slowly in Finland than in southern European countries and was a result of both external and internal factors, both of which were heatedly contested in public debates. External factors included the global collapse of export markets, the downfall of the Russian economy, and the sanctions regime against the country, which resulted in the collapse of trade with one of Finland's main trading partners. Internally, two key economic sectors of Finland (IT and forest industries) underwent structural changes, which increased unemployment (see Holmström, Sixten, & Matti, 2014). As a result, Finland's gross domestic product (GDP) declined by nearly 9 per cent in 2009, growth remained modest in 2010–2011, while output declined once again in 2012–2013 (Holmström et al., 2014, p. 2). The government worked hard in 2011–2015 to raise public awareness about the 'crisis' and to create the right atmosphere for introducing austerity politics (Kantola, 2018). The right-conservative government, which came to power in 2015, implemented these austerity measures with the intention of increasing Finland's competitiveness in global markets.

Feminist scholarship has generated a considerable volume of research about the gendered impact of the ongoing economic crisis and its policy solutions (Bargawi, Cozzi, & Himmelweit, 2017; Bettio et al., 2012; Hozic & True, 2016; Kantola & Lombardo, 2017; Karamessini & Rubery, 2014; Lahey & de Villota, 2013; Walby, 2015). In Finland, men's employment in the private sector (e.g., in construction businesses) was initially the worst hit, whilst the crisis worsened the working conditions of women in the public sector in the second and subsequent phases. The government adopted a policy of making significant cuts in public services and benefits, including dismantling the hallmark of the women-friendly welfare state: the statutory right to public childcare for all children. It also proposed to corporatize and marketize public social and healthcare provision by transferring costs from employees to private employers in order to increase international competitiveness. A number of scholars have discussed how decreasing the public services relies on, and reproduces, gender roles that delegate the major responsibility of care to women, and thus shifts national gender regimes toward more conservative directions (Klatzer & Schlager, 2014; Lombardo, 2017). In Finland, the political projects of neoliberalism, conservatism and nationalism resulted in detrimental effects on gender equality, equality policies and women's movement activism (Elomäki & Kantola, 2018). The previously effective 'state feminism' and the close cooperation between the women's movement, femocrats working within the state as well as academic feminists (see Holli, 2006) were in crisis too as the state ceased to generate favourable outcomes to advance gender equality. Similarly, the primacy of the narrative about the 'economic crisis' pushed feminist knowledge production into new margins (Cavaghan, 2017; Kantola, 2018). The language of 'gender' and 'gender equality' seemed incommensurate with the heightened primacy of the economy, economic competitiveness and austerity.

Academic feminist knowledge production, and its diffusion in the context of economic crisis (see, e.g., Pereira, 2012), is characterized by a constant struggle between the desire to have an impact and at the same time to remain critical. The key question has been whether feminist academic knowledge becomes compromised, or co-opted, when it engages with political processes, actors and institutions, such as states, governments and international organizations (Caglar, Prügl, & Zwingel, 2013). The concern about co-optation has been an integral element to debates about state feminism and academic feminists in Finland (e.g., Holli, 2006). The neoliberalization of national and global governance structures has intensified these concerns and sparked the emergence of new analytical concepts such as 'market feminism', 'governance feminism' and 'crisis governance feminism', which have all illustrated in their distinct ways how feminism itself changed when it engaged with neoliberal governance structures (Griffin, 2015; Halley, Kotiswaran, Rebouché, & Shamir, 2018; Kantola & Squires, 2012; Prügl, 2011). At the core of this process is the development of a particular kind of feminist knowledge: co-opted, governance-friendly expert knowledge that fits with the prevailing logics of neoliberal governance (Griffin, 2015; Prügl, 2011). As a result, governance feminism has been markedly silent about the gendered underpinnings of global governance and financial governance, focusing instead on supporting institutional measures to enhance women's participation (Griffin, 2015, p. 66).

The case of Finland starkly illustrates how the belief in the state as a partner in progressive change for gender equality breaks down. It has resulted in the emergence of new forms of feminist activism, not only the loose grass-roots networks more distant from state institutions and the academic feminist actors studied in this article, but also the emergence of new, more explicitly state feminist actors, such as the Feminist Party and the feminist network of the Parliament (Elomäki & Kantola, 2017). Similar to governance feminism, these new forms of activism may be co-opted in new ways, however, the case studied in this article also illustrates the continuing power of state feminism. After a moment of upheaval, there is a partial return to old ways of operating, namely close cooperation with the state and the consequent risks of co-optation.

It is argued here that despite their differences, both 'state feminism' and 'governance feminism' tend to result in pessimistic interpretations about the possibilities of feminist knowledge to have an impact on the state and governance structures. Critical feminist analyses drawing on the literature on governance feminism are better equipped to see co-optation and the downsides of compromises. To counter this and to bring out the ambiguities of the process that are studied, we expand the theoretical and conceptual framework with the study of affects. In what follows, we analyse the dynamics of affects, political will and knowledge production between the diverse feminist actors and

the state, as well as coalitions and loyalties between the actors. Furthermore, we shed light on the affective work that negotiating the conditions of neoliberal governance entails for feminist academics engaged in political processes.

3 | METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH MATERIALS

This case of feminist knowledge production and diffusion is based on a two-year period (2015–2017) of action research and participant observation by the authors (as researchers) in a feminist action that combines reflection and action, and sought to influence government policies and public discussion. These methods have been used to go back and forth between our own experiences, their social and cultural context, as well as feminist theory in order to involve 'the self' in feminist knowledge production (see Etorre, 2017). However, we use the notion of action research with some hesitation since the process did not start with a specific plan. Rather, we found ourselves moving from the open letter to the government in June 2015, to encounters with politicians, involvement in policy preparations and the launch of a new research outreach project as a framework for cooperating with public institutions. Very soon in 2015, we came to regard our own actions as objects of research, and what initially felt like a singular case of feminist activism, became reconceptualized as a case study of feminist knowledge production and diffusion in the context of austerity politics and neoliberal governance.

The research materials consist of written documents, including the open letter to the government, materials relating to its preparation (email exchanges and notes on face-to-face discussions), media coverage (print, TV, radio and social media), minutes of parliamentary debates, press releases by various organizations, as well as our own public statements and notes on encounters with politicians and participation in policy preparation. Based on these materials, a narrative was conceptualized that until now has five acts. Beginning with the open letter and concluding with a spin-off project under the auspices of the Ministry of Finance, each offered insights into the possibilities and constraints of feminist knowledge production and diffusion and the role of affect in various instances. In reading the process as a narrative, a sequentiality is highlighted, reflecting the intentions and actions, as well as analysing interactions as occasions where we and others enact and frame feminist knowledge. Importantly, when reading the acts as consequential, the narrative frame allows for the tracking of effects, and the trajectory of the demands and goals of the initial open letter and, hence, to discuss the conditions of feminist knowledge production and participation in policy preparation.

Previous research on gender equality policies and feminist resistance in the Nordic countries is drawn upon in the analysis. Significantly, poststructuralist studies and critical discourse analyses have highlighted a tradition of discursive competence, underlining the importance of gender equality proponents for achieving competence in a variety of argumentation modes (Brunila, 2009; Lombardo, Meier, & Verloo, 2009; Magnusson, Rönblom, & Silius, 2008). Here, this perspective is pursued, but enlarged to encompass an understanding of both affects and emotions as thoroughly social, and able to structure social situations and interactions (Ahmed, 2004, 2017; Koivunen, 2010; Seigworth & Gregg, 2010; Skeggs & Wood, 2012; Wetherell, 2012). Academic expertise and discursive competence have played a crucial role in building political consensus on gender equality, but both the preparation and the reception of the open letter and our consecutive encounters with politicians and policymakers testify to the importance of affects informing both knowledge production and diffusion.

As Alison Jaggar (1989) has argued, the western philosophical tradition has established a gendered opposition between rationality coded as male and emotionality coded as female: considering emotion as irrational and epistemologically subversive, thus serves to uphold 'the myth of dispassionate investigation' (p. 161), which has historically marginalized women as knowledge producers. Consequently, it denies any understanding of the interconnectedness of emotions, values and knowledge. This gendered and hierarchical distinction has also informed research into social movements, where 'cold cognition' has been prioritized over 'hot emotions' (Ferree & Merrill, 2000). The ideas of social movements have often been studied as dispassionate thought, ignoring the importance of emotions and passions to political judgments and engagement with a cause (see, however, Ahmed, 2004, 2017; Hesford, 2013). At the

same time, the notion of emotions as 'hot' limits critical analysis, risking the misreading of 'coldness' or non-passionate expressions as absence of affect.

In our case, the encounters between academic scholars and politicians feature 'hot' emotions such as anger, frustration and being offended, which emerged as important frames for making claims about gender equality. Expressing emotions, or withholding them, shapes social relations and the authority of knowledge. At the same time, regarding affects as 'hotter' or 'colder' intensities and forces, increase or decrease the capacities of both individuals and institutions, thus arranging relations between people and things; attaching or detaching, bringing them close or pushing them away (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 1; Skeggs & Wood, 2012, pp. 134–138). As Skeggs and Wood contend in their study of television, the concept of affect is needed to introduce a notion of ambiguity to our understanding of governmentality. The notion of hegemonic discourse is not enough to describe and account for the many, often contradictory, forms of political agency or argumentation (Skeggs & Wood, 2012, pp. 136–142). The reality television audiences studied by Skeggs and Wood recognized the ideological invitations of neoliberal society to self-controlling citizenship but respond with ambivalence. Similarly, we suggest here that feminist knowledge producers negotiate their relationship with neoliberal governance, needing not only discursive, but also affective virtuosity. Whereas discursive virtuosity is about manifesting command of contradictory aims and discourses in equality work (Brunila, 2013, p. 95), affective virtuosity entails not only the competence to analyse and negotiate the conflicting emotions in the room but also within oneself.

This importance of affective virtuosity as emotional labour is evident in Sara Ahmed's (2012, 2017) research on diversity practitioners' experiences of 'being included' and fighting sexism in universities. Figures of 'angry person of color' (Ahmed, 2012, p. 159), 'feminist killjoy' or 'pushy feminist' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 110) exist in the room or public sphere before anybody gets there. Characterizing the politics of emotion that frames antiracist work in academia, she argues that, 'when you do turn up, if things become tense, you become the cause of tension or even the one who is "tense"' (Ahmed, 2012, p. 159). While not suggesting any simple equivalence, Ahmed's (2012) account of the emotional labour entailed in attempting to transform institutions, to embed diversity or to make it a given issue as well as the frustrations and fatigue of 'the experience of the brick wall' (p. 26) exposes recognizable dynamics of affects, arguments and political will in feminist knowledge production and diffusion. It makes visible how affect, rather than indicating clearly definable psychological states, reads as a question of forming and patterning social relations (Wetherell, 2012).

In our analysis, we distinguish several affectively charged figures that emerged in the process of negotiating feminist knowledge in neoliberal governance. Embodying and circumventing the figure of angry or pushy feminist, we met with infuriated and offended politicians as well as benevolent policymakers, and ended up in the roles of: (i) the respectable academic; (ii) the female complainant; (iii) the empathetic listener; (iv) the frustrated expert; and (v) the strategic partner. In our analysis, we read all instances as negotiations with affective ambivalence, and the affective figures as symptoms of variously critiquing and compromising with governance.

4 | THE RESPECTABLE ACADEMIC: THE DEPOLITICIZING GESTURES OF EXPERTISE

Mainly as a consequence of their close relationship to the state and political parties, established women's organizations reactions to austerity were too slow and too timid, thus leaving a void to be filled by new actors. Although the actions studied in this article were not the only new feminist initiatives sparked by austerity, they were the most visible and effective ones. The anger and frustration that we as feminist academics felt in the face of the gendered austerity policies, the sidelining of gender equality and the inaction of established women's organizations, manifested itself as a political protest in June 2015. The protest, which took the form of an open letter and a preliminary gender impact assessment of the government programme, was based on mobilizing existing feminist knowledge about the gendered impact of austerity. The first act thus illustrates how feminist researchers can use their expertise as the

basis of political critique. However, the case also shows how feminist attachments (Ahmed, 2004) are negotiated as a dilemma in knowledge diffusion, and how the neutral position of academic experts calls for distance from the affective basis of feminist critique and the depoliticizing of its political edge.

The idea behind conducting a gender impact assessment of the government programme was to criticize the government with its own tools — reflecting governance feminism. Gender impact assessment has been one of the tools of the Finnish government regarding gender mainstreaming. Our initial plan was to publicize the gender impact assessment in collaboration with established women's organizations to gain more credibility. The key collaboration body of women's organizations, the Coalition of Finnish Women's Associations (NYTKIS), on whose board some of us represented the gender studies community, and the Association for Gender Studies in Finland (SUNS), rejected the idea, illustrating the differently restricted roles of these organizations. Whereas NYTKIS was limited by a membership constituted of women's associations of political parties, the SUNS' view was that a scientific association should not take part in politics.

Finally, we decided to gather the signatures of individual professors and researchers and write an open letter based on a preliminary gender impact assessment, and direct it toward the government and the media. This strategy ensured that academic prestige and expertise would give our concerns the credibility and weight they needed in order to be heard. Given the contemporary anti-feminist sentiments among populist and other politicians, the aim was to include as many male signatories as possible on the basis that gender balance would make it more difficult to dismiss our claims. Eighty-five professors from different disciplines and universities signed the letter, 40 per cent of whom were men.

In the open letter, we presented three arguments about the government programme. Firstly, because of the gender impact and the sidelining of gender equality, the letter asserted that 'the government will not be able to reach its goals related to employment, well-being and education'. Secondly, that 'women and female-dominated sectors pay an unreasonable economic and human bill for the adjustments'. Finally, that the government programme 'waters down decades of long-term work to promote gender equality', noting a particular concern that 'transferring responsibility for care from the society to families in practice transfers it to women and leads towards a male-breadwinner family model' (*Professoreiden ...*, 2015). Two requirements were demanded. Firstly, that similar to previous governments, the current administration should adopt an action plan for gender equality. Secondly, that the gender impacts of the government programme should be systematically assessed, and measures that are found to increase inequality should be rejected or changed.

The open letter represented a new form of feminist critique and advocacy in Finland. In contrast to the case of established organizations, the credibility of the initiative did not come from representing the interests of women *per se*, but from individual prestige and academic expertise. The absence of an organizational structure, such as a board, made it possible to act fast. Furthermore, the initiative engaged well-known individuals who would not normally participate in public debates about gender equality. Despite the fact that many of the signatories perceived it as an enlightened opinion based on academic knowledge, for us, the statement was clearly an act of feminist activism.

The form that our activism took is comparable to recent transformations of governance as well as with governance feminism. The increasing emphasis on evidence-based policy making — criticized for highlighting the rational aspects of policy making and pushing the political aside (e.g., Marston & Watts, 2003) — has meant that gender equality actors are encouraged to ground their advocacy on 'legitimate' and 'objective' expert knowledge rather than on more political claims. As researchers we easily adopted the role of the objective and rational knowledge provider, subscribing to the 'myth of the dispassionate investigation' (Jaggar, 1989, p. 161). Taking the position of academic experts led to an implicit, yet self-evident effort, to control affects. The risk that feminist critique could be reduced to 'a politics of emotion' (Ahmed, 2004, p. 170) and dismissed as such was tangible, which is why the anger and frustration caused by the government programme were hidden under the cloak of neutral expertise. Avoidance of direct blaming and affective expressions was also the wish of many of the signatories of the open letter.

The emphasis on academic expertise, and the use of the tools of governance feminism, had a distancing and depoliticizing impact on the content of the open letter. First, this focus masked the feminist basis of the critique

by formulating the message in a way that sidelined questions about gendered power and prioritized, economized and instrumentalized understandings of gender equality. In the final analysis, we changed the order of the key arguments to make the message more acceptable: prioritizing the idea of the ineffectiveness of gender-blind policies over the gendered effects of austerity measures. In doing so, we offered the government an economized, neoliberal gender equality discourse that viewed gender equality as an instrument to reach economic goals and improve effectiveness (Elomäki, 2015; Roberts, 2015). Reliance on statistics and numbers was also a conscious choice. Knowing them to be governance feminist tools, for us, they underlined the emphasis on expertise thus strengthening the message.

Second, we made attempts to consciously avoid formulations that would connect us to the parliamentary opposition and its critique of the government programme. We neither openly questioned the government's austerity policies, nor did we make any specific challenge to the view of the economic situation, and the need for spending cuts that framed the government programme. Equally, we uncritically adopted the government's own language of 'adjustments' and 'savings' (*sopeutukset* and *säästöt*), instead of the tactic of directly discussing 'austerity' as left-wing politicians would have done (*leikkaukset*, *leikkauspolitiikka*). Although our critique of austerity and its gendered consequences were more explicit than that of established women's organizations, our emphasis on academic expertise and the tools of governance feminism led to co-optation effects on us similar to those experienced by them.

Finally, the role of neutral academic experts that we as feminist knowledge producers played masked both the neoliberal and the conservative ideologies informing the government's policies. The emphasis we placed on knowledge and facts was connected to the belief in the transformative potential of expert knowledge. The logic behind the initiative was that if the government had been aware of the gender impacts of its policies, it would not have made the kind of proposals that it did. This logic downplayed the possibility of the government's conscious effort to make gender equality-weakening policies due to its neoliberal and conservative ideologies.

5 | THE FEMALE COMPLAINANT: THE GENDER CONFLICT REPOLITICIZED

As a media event, the open letter was, despite rhetorical strategies to the contrary, removed from the realm of academic neutrality and placed into the realm of politics. The letter was posted on 11 June 2015 on the website of The National Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) that published gender equality information and was also distributed on social media. The open letter was framed as a political act by the largest Finnish daily newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*, giving it a prominent place as a major news item in its print version and published it as a cover story on its website (Kauhanen, 2015a). *Helsingin Sanomat* published the news headlined, 'Professors: Women Pay the Bill' (Kauhanen, 2015b, p. A7) on the front page, along with 'The Government Forgot Women'. The online version had the caption 'Tens of professors criticize the government fiercely: women pay for the cuts. 85 professors and research directors criticize the government for a lack of gender equality perspective in its programme' (Kauhanen, 2015a).

The newspaper's decision to make a news story about the open letter turned it into a media event. Furthermore, it reframed the letter in terms of the gender conflict; the headline statements ('government forgot women', 'women pay the bill' and 'women pay for the cuts') mobilized online activism. The online news story remained the most-read until early evening and was shared up to 15,000 times on social media. Whilst we in the letter had neutralized feminist and political critique, highlighting academic expertise instead, *Helsingin Sanomat* exposed the underlying gender conflict and the political critique at the heart of the open letter. The figure of the female complainant (Berlant, 2008) surfaced in the underlying feminist anger and consequently downplayed its neoliberal message of gender equality as a means of enhancing efficiency.

The *Helsingin Sanomat* story was quoted by other major news outlets (e.g., *Ilta-lehti*, 2015; Järvi, 2015; MTV, 2015) and distributed via the national news agency. Many news outlets noted that the letter was signed by many professors from different disciplines, including Deans and even Vice Chancellors, and that 40 per cent of the signatories were male. *Helsingin Sanomat* described the list as featuring 'virtually the whole of Finnish research elite in the fields of sociology, work life studies, and social policy' (Kauhanen, 2015b). Some newspapers (e.g., Halonen, 2015)

outside Helsinki interviewed the local signatories, asking them about their motivations for participation. Many news stories named and interviewed well-known male professors.

In retrospect, had the signatories been mostly women and/or scholars in gender studies, it is likely that the open letter would not have received the extensive media coverage that it did, meaning it would have been taken less seriously. A recent study showed that 70 per cent of media experts in Finland are men, suggesting that the role is coded as male to some extent (Niemi & Pitkänen, 2017). From this perspective, the fact that the SUNS refused to publish the letter may be considered a lucky coincidence. When collecting signatures, it was assumed that well-respected male scholars would lend the gender equality agenda public credibility; this was proven to be right. Paradoxically, female scholars specializing in gender studies are not necessarily recognized as experts but viewed as representatives of their sex, and somehow robbed of their expertise and framed as 'activists'. In the public eye, female experts on gender equality tend to be framed by a historical imagery of feminism as emotionally out of control (Ahmed, 2004, 2017; Hinds & Stacey, 2001). Thus, for feminist scholars, demonstrating affective reticence, manifesting 'cold cognition' (Ferree & Merrill, 2000), emphasizing academic respectability and using a technical discourse on gender equality offered an alternative role to feminists rather than just testifying from experience.

The media attention and circulation the open letter received led to a quick response. The *Helsingin Sanomat* correspondent in Brussels approached the Prime Minister the same day and received this response to our demands: 'Let us first do the reform and then review what we achieved. Then, of course, we assess the impact of the plan' (Kähkönen & Raeste, 2015). The Prime Minister's answer revealed his unfamiliarity with the general principles of an impact assessment — that assessments should be conducted as part of comparing alternative solutions to issues before decisions about a bill are made. His statement was duly criticized, and the following morning, the Prime Minister posted on Twitter: 'Promoting gender equality is self-evident for the government. According to the governmental programme, page 25, a Legislation Assessment Council will be established' (Sipilä, 2015). This tweet became a news story as well (e.g., *Aamulehti*, 2015). He patched up his earlier statement by referring to a long-term project aimed at ameliorating the quality of legislation.

With the help of the media, the open letter and its demands were raised on the Prime Minister's agenda, and through the media the signatures were figuratively handed over as we had hoped. As an important arena of politics, the media has offered relatively little space for gender equality issues and feminist discussions, but the open letter made a significant impact: making newspaper headlines, gaining national coverage, and being featured on the public service television's morning show and even in editorials. The analysis shows that highlighting academic expertise played a key role in this exposure. By comparison, a public statement issued the same week by women's organizations, critiquing many of the same issues as the open letter, received barely any media attention.

6 | THE AFFECTIVE POLITICIAN AND THE EMPATHETIC LISTENER

The third act in the narrative of feminist knowledge production and diffusion focused on politicians' reactions and consequent meetings with them. The open letter reflected the distance between feminist academics and politicians as quite short in Finland, a feature which state feminism often exploits. In this case, the closeness and the access were aided in art by the media, which challenged the politicians to react. Although politicians offered feminist academics the position of ex posteriori evaluators, the gender mainstreaming mandate is for a priori assessment of the gender impact of a proposed policy, since evaluation afterwards has few practical consequences (Roggeband & Verloo, 2006; Verloo, 2001). The case also shows that when access was granted, the politicians were not interested in feminist knowledge *per se* but in expressing their emotions — anger, frustration and offended feelings generated by this knowledge. The following paragraphs explore how critiquing a politician's gender politics is often read as a critique of the politician's personal characteristics and interpreted as offensive.

The news about the open letter was published on the day of question hour in the Finnish Parliament and was exploited by opposition MPs. The Minister of Family Affairs and Social Services, whose remit included the gender

equality policy, came across not only as ignorant, but also frustrated with being asked questions. Admitting he had no answers, he stated, 'I say openly and aloud in front of the Parliament that on the 13th day, as a minister, I do not have this information' (Finnish Parliament, 2015). However, he sought to assure MPs about the government's commitment to gender equality. A significant outcome of the debate was his promise that the government would make an action plan for gender equality, affirming that, 'Gender equality issues belong to the whole government, and we will prepare independently and in our own schedule, [an] action plan for gender equality for this electoral term' (Finnish Parliament, 2015). Driven by frustration in the face of perceived impossible demands, such statements were characterized by benign ignorance of gender equality. Further declarations that they were 'independent' and untainted by any influence, became typical reactions of the government. Their effect was to challenge the legitimacy of feminist knowledge claims and frame them as impossible, unfair and requiring too much.

As discussed above, the Prime Minister's first reaction to the open letter was to defensively emphasize that the government's support of gender equality was self-evident. A 'hotter', more affectively charged, dismissive and confrontational reaction followed a week later (16 June 2015), when he discussed the open letter with political correspondents. He 'compared the critics of budget cuts to the Prime Minister of Greece' Aléxis Tsípras and said that it was 'unreasonable' to demand 'assessments of the reforms when there [was] not even an implementation plan yet' (Kotkavirta, 2015). The comparison to Tsípras illustrated that he did not recognize the open letter's attempt to avoid identifying with the opposition politics. Instead, he interpreted the demand as a general critique of austerity politics, unjustified and as such false. The Prime Minister's comments were filled with indignation at his critics. In the same interview, he stated that 'Even though the government programme does not mention, for example, [the] gendered wage gap or gender segregation, the government has not forgotten gender equality' and specified, '*Self-evident truths* are not mentioned in the *strategic* government programme. It is self-evident that these evaluations will be made and that they form the basis for decision making' (Kotkavirta, 2015; our emphasis).

Gender equality researchers have analysed the way of speaking about gender equality as 'self-evident' (e.g., Holli, 2012; Julkunen, 2010). Such a discourse represents the idea that either gender equality has already been achieved in Finland, or at least all the means to achieve gender equality already exist in the 'women-friendly' welfare state. The self-evident nature of gender equality effectively shifts the political gaze away from existing gender equality problems (Holli, 2012). In turn, the emphasis on the 'strategic' government programme pushes gender equality further to the margins. As it is not a strategic priority area, it is in danger of not existing at all (Elomäki, Kantola, Koivunen, & Ylöstalo, 2016).

After the conspicuous news coverage, the future Minister of Family Affairs and Social Services and Vice President of The Centre Party and her assistant met us on 16 June 2015. She too gave assurances that gender equality was important to the government and to her personally, without it having to be articulated separately. She said that the government would 'of course' continue advancing gender equality in its policies. Even more than the Prime Minister and on a more personal level – as one feminist to another – she seemed to find it offensive that we even suspected otherwise.

Whilst this meeting was a sign that the critique was being taken seriously, it soon became a scenario where those naming a problem, or calling out an injury, were being addressed as the problem or the injury (Ahmed, 2012, p. 147, 2017, pp. 99–100; Koivunen, Kyrölä, & Ryberg, 2018) and of 'not letting things recede' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 34). At the same time, the figure of the offended politician emerged as a symptom of gender equality, being equated with a personal stance or a personally held value (Skeggs, 2004) and of holding an ethical commitment that does not require concrete political actions. Being criticized for the government's policy on gender equality can therefore be experienced by a politician both as an 'institutional injury' (Ahmed, 2012, p. 147), a threat to an organization's reputation and as a personal offence; it is not perceived as directed at actions, or the lack of them, but at either institutional or personal values. In such encounters, the feminist scholar is interpellated as an empathetic listener, downplaying the critique and investing in persuasion through appeals for collaboration (Ahmed, 2017, p. 100).

The relationship between feminist knowledge production and economic decision-making was the key issue of the discussion with the Minister designate and vice-chair of the governing party. Confronting the critique, she

wanted to know if the open letter meant that we did not accept the government's economic policy and whether gender equality, in our assessment, had progressed during the previous government when her own party was the opposition. She said that she could not accept criticisms of the government's austerity politics as 'the cuts need[ed] to be implemented'. Being offended allowed her to reject the critique on gender blindness as an attempt to destabilize the economy. The hierarchical relationship between the economy and gender equality was such that a particular understanding of economic policy — the necessity of austerity politics — formed the framework to which there were no alternatives. Our response — the desire for government policy to be based on academic knowledge and research — reflected our attempt to appear as empathetic listeners and to stay strictly in the position of academic expertise. Retaining our position as experts and emphasizing the demand for research-informed decisions, we made the gender impacts of austerity politics visible without questioning their ideological basis. As a benevolent gesture, calling for an alliance, the Minister designate proposed a new meeting with us towards the end of the government term to evaluate whether gender equality indeed had regressed or progressed. In so doing, she too advocated the view that the role of research was that of an *ex post* evaluator of the policy success or failure, rather than as a participant in setting the agenda, its objectives and alternatives.

Nonetheless, the promise of an action plan for gender equality can be considered a successful outcome of the open letter. In the governance model of 'strategic government' adopted by the government, it was not self-evident that gender equality would be perceived as an independent policy area to be developed with a specific action plan. Rather, the government's attempt was to reduce the amount of such papers, as well as the length of those that were published. The parliamentary debate on the topic made it clear that the gender equality action plan would be undertaken in a new way, to cite the Minister of Family Affairs and Social Services, 'in the spirit of the strategic government programme' (Finnish Parliament, 2015).

7 | THE FRUSTRATED EXPERT: FEMINIST KNOWLEDGE IN A POLITICAL PERFORMANCE

As the literature on governance feminism suggests, participation in policy making processes does not necessarily entail change if the frames of these processes are pre-determined, thus leaving little space for feminist critique (Griffin, 2015; Halley et al., 2018; Prügl, 2011). This became evident, when the government started preparing its action plan for gender equality in 2015. The kickstart for the preparation was a workshop with 120 gender equality experts (including us) invited, comprising representatives of women's and gender equality organizations, trade unions, gender equality researchers, gender equality consultants and state officials. Participation in the workshop constitutes the fourth act of the case.

When opening the workshop, the Minister of Family Affairs and Social Services announced 'we have a new style'. Unlike the previous, and quite detailed action plans (Elomäki & Ylöstalo, 2017), the new action plan would be significantly shorter — a brief strategic document to describe the concrete actions with which the government would promote gender equality during its term. This 'new style' meant that the gender equality policy would be required to adapt to the demands of neoliberal governance; to use technocratic instruments such as statistics, indicators and gender impact assessments. Gender equality research has pointed out that such approaches may lead to reducing complex gender equality issues to simple technical measurements, as well as articulating a concept of gender equality that resonates with dominant policy frames (Kantola & Saari, 2014; Prügl, 2016; Ylöstalo, 2016).

After the opening speeches, the participants were divided into six working groups with pre-determined topics such as gender mainstreaming and gendered violence. The purpose of the working groups was to form three concrete goals for the government term, as well as one to two measures by which these goals could be reached. The groups were given approximately one hour to complete this task. We were assigned to the gender mainstreaming group. Our group's three goals resulted from votes and compromises instead of a deliberative discussion. As gender equality researchers, it was frustrating to simplify complex issues into a handful of concrete goals and measures, especially

since this kind of approach was so commonly critiqued in the gender mainstreaming literature that many of the groups' contributors were responsible for (e.g., Elomäki & Ylöstalo, 2017; Kantola, 2010; Ylöstalo, 2016). All the policy suggestions of our working group and of the others followed the well-worn path of gender equality policy in Finland; no new openings occurred (for the hegemonic gender equality discourse in Finland, see Holli, 2012; Julkunen, 2010; Kantola & Saari, 2014).

Although the workshop appeared to offer experts and interest groups the opportunity to define the goals of the gender equality policy, the pre-determined frames for the discussion frustrated most. The dynamics of the workshop, namely its consensual and goal-oriented form, did not allow any space to question these frames or propose changes; accepting them was a precondition for participation and inevitably resulted in weak compromises that reinforced the alliance of the gender equality policy and neoliberal governance. This case also provides an insight into the role of feminist knowledge in policy making; feminist researchers, as well as other gender equality experts, were there to participate within pre-given frames, not to make changes. In many respects, this reinforced the view that neoliberal governance reconstitutes politics as a field of management and administration, as such 'public life is reduced to problem solving and program implementation, a casting that brackets or eliminates politics, conflict, and deliberation about common values or ends' (Brown, 2015, p. 127). In such a context it is extremely difficult to resist the co-optation of feminist knowledge. Within these frames, academic feminist knowledge becomes one perspective among others; where research, expertise, opinions and experiences are on a par with one another. The purpose of participation is presence and participation through performance, not knowledge. For frustrated academics, being inside felt like serving as an academic smoke screen without a voice of one's own.

8 | THE STRATEGIC PARTNER: COLLABORATION AND CO-OPTATION

Despite this, the final scene of the case demonstrates how an academic position is nevertheless one of privilege, providing access to processes and institutions of economic policy making not available to all. However, the opportunities to make an impact on these processes and institutions are limited, and the aspirations for collaboration tend to result in the co-option of the feminist critique and a sense of disenchantment. 'Thinking strategically' and becoming a strategic partner entails accepting one's complicity, letting go of 'any illusions of purity', and as Sara Ahmed (2017, p. 94) elegantly summarizes, embracing the merits of 'cold cognition' and the messiness of diversity work.

After the successful open letter, we decided that a more permanent structure would be needed to make critical feminist voices heard in economic policy making. A useful precedent was the UK Women's Budget Group, a network of feminist economists and other researchers that scrutinized government policy from a gender perspective. We obtained funding for a project that aimed to popularize scientific knowledge about gender equality and to bring it into public and political debates about the economy. The project was named Gender Equality Deficit (*Tasa-arvovaje*).

During the period 2016–2017, dozens of research-based blogs were published that analysed policy reforms from the gender equality perspective. Seminars were also organized with benevolent key actors in the field of economics, such as the Institute for Economic Research (VATT), the Employment and Equality Committee of the Finnish Parliament, as well as the Bank of Finland, which indicated that we had access to institutions of economic power — or at least in the outskirts of them. The more theoretically oriented aim was to draft 'Plan F' for Finland, a plan for a balanced and sustainable economic recovery that would include women and other marginalized groups and would support gender equality (see Pearson & Elson, 2015).

The project created a platform for critical feminist debates about the economy, economics and economic policy. Moreover, it filled the gap between researchers and policymakers with relevant feminist knowledge claims framed in policy language. Academic knowledge gave access to strongholds of the economy and economic power — if not to make significant changes, then at least to discuss issues in the form of statements to parliamentary committees. As mentioned above, in the context of neoliberal governance, external actors able to supply policy-relevant knowledge are delegated greater authority, but also encouraged to frame their intervention in 'objective' terms. Whilst it was

possible to avoid deploying economic arguments in framing our goals (see, e.g., Roberts, 2015), our collaborative approach nevertheless depoliticized feminist knowledge claims.

The promotion of co-opted, governance-friendly feminist knowledge (see Griffin, 2015; Prügl, 2011) is even more evident in the *Gender Equality in the Government Budget* research project, on which two of us started work in September 2017. The project, which was an outcome of the open letter and the consequent events, develops methods that assess the gender impacts of the government budget and forms part of the government's analysis, assessment and research activities coordinated by the Prime Minister's Office. It applies a very particular form of feminist expertise – on how to mainstream gender in the state budget – and aims to make this knowledge useful for the purposes of state administration. Surprisingly, we had a better access to the Ministry of Finance and key budgetary actors than the gender equality actors in the state administration had. This illustrates not only the marginalized position of femocrats and state feminism in economic decision-making, but also the possibilities afforded to the expert role. We found ourselves in the role of mediators between gender equality and budgetary actors by bringing not only gender issues and feminist knowledge but also feminist civil servants to the tables where budgetary processes are discussed. As strategic partners of policymakers we withheld our own frustrations, using affective virtuosity to navigate the conflicts and misunderstandings between the gender equality and budget actors, to act as facilitators.

While feminist knowledge secured feminist researchers' access to developing budgetary processes, from a gender perspective the project's impact was limited to producing and implementing practical solutions to technically defined problems – best practices for value-free technical knowledge, validated by experience and consensus (see Brown, 2015). The critical question remained, as Penny Griffin (2015) puts it, '... whether feminists can resist the co-optation of feminist knowledge while working with neoliberal institutions, actors and policies to keep gender considerations at hand across discourses of governance' (p. 67).

9 | CONCLUSIONS

This article has explored the possibilities and constraints of feminist knowledge production to influence policy making and public debate in the context of austerity and neoliberal governance. With first-hand illustrations of the strategies adopted by feminist academics in negotiating the new political context, their engagement in debates about economic policy, the acts analysed here have revealed the affective dynamics in this process. Specifically, we have studied the process of feminist knowledge production that unfolded in Finland in 2015–2017, a case that uniquely illustrates how feminist academics can use their expert positions to influence policy and bring feminist knowledge into the political debate. Drawing on theories of governance feminism, it has been shown that even when academic feminist knowledge is welcomed in policy making, its position remains marginal and its successes have been driven by compromise and co-optation. At the same time, the case exposed the dynamics of affect, political will, and the distance between knowledge producers, politicians and policymakers, as well as showing how the roles of the feminist scholar in the context of neoliberal austerity politics are shaped. Affective encounters with benevolent, dismissive, offended and even angry politicians and policymakers, conditioned knowledge production and diffusion. The angry, or pushy feminists, the characterization of female complainants who call out gendered injustices, are not easily accommodated with the role of disciplined academic or strategic partner of policymakers but requires constant negotiation. The figure of female complainant and the manifestation of 'hot emotions' may attract attention and open doors to politicians and policymakers, but becoming a strategic partner demands affective reticence and appeals to 'dispassionate investigation'.

By bringing analyses of affects to governance feminism's somewhat pessimistic focus on hegemonic discourses and the hold of neoliberal governance, this article has teased out the ambivalences in feminist knowledge production and diffusion. We have coined the term affective virtuosity to show with greater nuance, how negotiation with governance entails emotional labour, regulates distance and intensity, and shapes knowledge and its diffusion. Our

analysis reveals that while the roles and positions available for feminist researchers may seem and feel very limited, affective virtuosity does facilitate tangible impact on state and governance structures. Alongside proficiency with discourses, languages and vocabularies, a crucial condition to be heard was the competence to read, analyse, manage and reflect upon affects in the room and within oneself.

The case of Finland shows that when state feminism, as the traditional Finnish feminist way of operating subsided, it paved the way not only for new forms of feminist activism, including academic feminism, but also for new alliances between academic feminists and feminist civil servants. The government's austerity policy fuelled a crisis of confidence between feminists and the state, but the femocrats were equally shocked by the state of affairs as academic feminists. Although their hands were tied for different reasons, behind the scenes they supported our cause. Thus, if there was a division, it was first and foremost between feminists and the state, not between academic feminists and femocrats. At the same time, the close cooperation between academic feminists and the state reads like an updated version of state feminism and its conjoining risks of co-optation. Compared to the established women's organizations, and even juxtaposed with feminist actors within the state, academic feminist knowledge producers have fair access to the media and key decision-makers. When measured in terms of visibility and access, academic feminist knowledge therefore appears to have weight even in the context of austerity and neoliberal governance. Furthermore, to some extent, the feminist academic group became a bridge between key decision-makers, women's organizations and feminist actors within the state. This was particularly the case in matters related to economic policy, in part because the new alliances between academic and state feminists rose higher on the agenda of the Finnish women's movements. These partnerships are particularly important in the current situation, where the alliance between research knowledge and public governance is in crisis. Although the open letter brought unforeseen publicity for the gendered impacts of austerity, and the publicity opened access to decision-makers, feminist knowledge has had a limited impact on the content of policy. The reasons can be found in the new forms of governance that have influenced the role of research in policy making, as well as the idea of policy-relevant research.

The process that started with the open letter shows feminist knowledge production as simultaneously successful and marginal. Whilst feminist knowledge and knowledge producers have been visible in the media and welcomed to ministerial cabinets, parliamentary committees and the Ministry of Finance – owing at least partly to the support of state feminists – their role has remained marginal. In our narrative, feminist knowledge producers have been assigned the roles of ex posteriori evaluators, collaborators invited to discuss economic policy and developers of technical impact assessment tools, rather than agenda-setters capable of initiating and changing policies. Such marginalization risks becoming more pronounced as the discourse and practice of evidence-based policy making in Finland moves towards randomized controlled trials and empirical studies that will demonstrate, albeit spurious, causalities. Consequently, theoretical approaches and qualitative methods that are typical in feminist academic knowledge production may appear irrelevant to policy development. At the same time, many of the successes of academic feminist knowledge in terms of visibility and access, have been fuelled by compromises and co-optation. The political and feminist aspects of the presented critique have been downplayed, and feminist knowledge has been made more governance friendly.

10 | RESEARCH MATERIAL

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

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How to cite this article: Elomäki A, Kantola J, Koivunen A, Ylöstalo H. Affective virtuosity: Challenges for governance feminism in the context of the economic crisis. *Gender Work Organ.* 2019;26:822–839. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12313>